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CONNECTICUT POST

Thursday, June 17, 2004

West's bighorns

struggle with

drought, disease

ASSOCIATED PRESS

RENO, Nev. - Wildlife

experts say about a third of

Nevada's largest herd of

California bighorn sheep

may have died of a

respiratory ailment that.

began claiming animals last

winter.

Another dead bighorn

was found Sunday in the

Santa Rosa Mountains north

of Winnemucca, leading

scientists to suspect the die-

off is not over.

"It's not a good sign,"

Mike Dobel, a game biologist

with the Nevada Department

of Wildlife, told the Reno

Gazette-Journal.

"We were hoping that the

event would have exhausted

itself. It appears we still have

something going on."

The latest animal showed

evidence of pneumonia and

other lung damage, the same

fatal condition experts

believe already has reduced

the Santa Rosa herd from

about 290 sheep in 2003 to 190

today.

Experts are particularly

concerned because the Santa

Rosa herd represents one of

the biggest success stories in Nevada's efforts to re-establish bighorn sheep, which nearly disappeared across the state after the arrival of European settlers and disease-carrying domestic sheep.

Twelve California bighorns were introduced in the Santa Rosa Mountains in 1978, and by last year the population approached 300. Concern arose just before Christmas when state officials started hearing stories of hunters finding sick and dead bighorns. Samples taken from dead and healthy bighorn provide some clues but few solid answers as to the source of the problem.

Alton Ward, a microbiologist who studied the die off said the Santa

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Rosa bighorns were substantially weakened by a variety of factors last winter. Prolonged drought reduced forage and lack of food might have weakened the herd, Ward noted in a report to the Nevada wildlife agency.

Twice-normal snowfall in December further could have weakened the animals by causing them to burn more energy pushing through deep snow.

Parasites, while common in bighorn, could have further diminished nutritional intake and made the bighorns more susceptible to infection resulting in the pneumonia that killed them.

"Those factors could have all contributed," Ward said. The combination might have resulted in a biological "perfect storm" that combined to produce the die-off, said Rick Furman, a Reno veterinarian and vice president of Nevada Bighorns Unlimited.

"It was probably the additive effects of multiple factors," Furman said.

"What we're suspecting is that this population of sheep was debilitated and that made them susceptible to viral infections."

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Bid to Save

Rare Crane

Advancing

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HEY are the tallest flying birds in the world, at five feet. Their bodies are pale gray, their heads a flash of color: green beaks, orange-yellow eyes and bright red necks. Their call, which they use to defend their territory, can be heard for miles.

Now these birds, members of a subspecies called the Eastern sarus crane that is found in Southeast Asia, are the object of intense preservation efforts.

They have been banished from southern China, Thailand and the Philippines by war, hunting and de-

velopment. But Cambodia, the last nation where the cranes are believed to flock in large numbers, has joined an international effort to save the birds, which have long been objects of adoration and mythology in Eastern culture. Several hundred are left.

The Department of Forestry in Cambodia recently signed an agreement that may be the first step toward preserving a large expanse of pristine wetlands where the cranes breed during the rainy season.

Many naturalists are concerned that the wetlands may be in danger as Cambodia modernizes. In early March, members of the International Crane Foundation, a Wisconsin-based group involved in the conservation effort, and the Royal Forestry Department of Thailand made an aerial survey of wetlands surrounding a large Cambodian lake, Tonle Sap, and the Mekong River.

Vast Wetlands, Few People

The foundation and the Thai forestry agency then signed the agreement with the Cambodian forestry agency, which will allow more detailed surveys and research in the wetlands.

The foundation hopes that will lead to intense preservation efforts in the region.

"There is a vast expanse of shallow wetlands with scattered trees and very few people," Dr. George Archibald, director of the International Crane Foundation, said of the Cambodian area. "It was like seeing a Shangri-La, a great ocean of tranquillity in the middle of a country torn apart by civil war."

This was the foundation's first look at the Cambodian lands, which had been considered too dangerous for naturalists to study, Dr. Archibald said. The foundation has been involved in conservation projects in Thailand and Vietnam since the mid-1980's.

Eastern sarus crane.

Tonle

Sap
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- Phnom Penh
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THE NEW YORK TIMES THE ENVIRONMENT

George Archibald

Mekong R

MEKONG

DELTA

VIETNAM

Ho Chi

Minh

City

The New York Times

Cambodian wetlands are breeding
grounds for giant cranes.

their wetland home, the Plain of

Reeds on the Mekong Delta, by the

war there. In Thailand, researchers

are breeding cranes in captivity and

hope to release them to the wild soon.

The wetland habitat in Cambodia

will help both missions, Dr. Archibald

said. It will provide a model for re-

storing the wetlands environment in

Vietnam. And it will offer Thai natu-

ralists a chance to see the birds on

their natural breeding grounds.

"These have been hostile neighbors

for thousands of years," Dr. Archi-

TUESDAY, APRIL 21, 1992

In Baking Wasteland, a Restoration Attempt

It is hard to coax a

desert back after it

has felt the plow.

F

IFTY years ago the saltbush

scrublands of the Sonoran

rel and hedgehog

Desert were filled with bar-

nog cacti, the

bizarre bat-pollinated night-blooming

cereus and wolfberry plants dotted

with their tomatillo fruits, as well as

the hardy, gray-green saltbush scrub

itself. Coyotes chased jackrabbits, hawks sailed the skies and the burrowing owl guarded its young in tunnels dug out of the scorching 100-degree ground.

That was before farmers began discovering in the 1930's that for cotton farming these desert soils of Arizona could be even more productive with irrigation than the moister lands of the Southeast. Over the years as the cotton industry saw boom and bust, farmers have plowed millions of acres of these lowland deserts only to abandon them later. Today many of these deserted farms hold little more than dust devils and tumbleweeds.

"It's flat; it's farmed; it's ruined," said Dr. Laura Jackson, a research ecologist at the Desert Botanical Garden in Phoenix who is exploring how to restore these deserts. "It reminds me of the plight of the prairie 10 years ago. It's not scenery. Mountains are scenery. People think that native vegetation isn't scenery. It's just the stuff around you."

The efforts of the Desert Botanical Garden are part of the growing restoration movement across the United States. Dr. Bill Jordan, a founder of the Society for Ecological Restoration, said: "Restoration is gaining fairly good foothold in most of the major ecosystems of the United States now. There are people out there who really know what restoration is and are starting to do it."

'An Acquired Taste'

As ecologists begin tackling the problem of restoring this land, which even they say calls for "an acquired taste," they are finding that the land is almost as difficult to restore as it is to appreciate.

Dr. Jackson says that without intervention these complex and now rare habitats covering millions of acres will probably never really begin recovering. "If this destruction were from a roadcut or mining were a wetland, there'd be laws re-

or if it

bald said. "Now these three Indochinese countries have the chance to cooperate on wildlife preservation."

Dr. Archibald hopes to take a group to Cambodia next

Researchers in Vietnam are trying, of researchers to Cagh study wine to restore the dry-season habitat of the cranes, which were driven from region as a basis for further preservation efforts.

son. "It's farmland so everyone thinks things will come back. But it's just not true."

The notion that farmlands just grow back on their

the East, where, said Dr. Peter

Marks, professor of plant ecology at

Dr. Joseph McAuliffe/Desert Botanical Garden

When irrigated cotton fields like this one in the Sonoran Desert are abandoned, restoration can be difficult because remaining native seeds may be miles away, making colonization very unlikely.

Cornell University, nature takes care of things. "If you let a field go it's going to bounce back to forest," he said. "The process can even begin within the first year and the visible evidence of the process is everywhere."

The deserted farmlands of the Sonoran Desert are so extensive, sometimes stretching uninterrupted for many square miles, that there is often no nearby source of native seeds to help them revert to the wild as happens when forest borders an abandoned field. So the desert lands sit waiting for seeds that never come.

Spread of Plants Is Blocked

Even if a stray seed does somehow manage to be blown in, it has to find one of the few crevices in soil that is sometimes so hardened and crusted over from farming that it looks like a road surface. If it somehow manages to find a hiding place from the wind and the heat, it will have to be in the one year in 10 when there will be enough rainfall for the seed to have any shot at germinating and taking hold. And even if the seed should sprout, the brutal heat in this desert

with the hottest nighttime temperatures in the world may manage to kill it anyway.

Ecologists are finding that restoring the desert, undoing everything the farming has done to the land, will be a long, slow, painstaking and expensive process.

Biologists must find native plants producing seed and harvest them by hand. Then each seed must be planted, one at a time, again by hand.

"Restoring prairie or western rangeland you can use seed planting techniques for sowing grass," Dr. Jackson said, "but not here." After planting their seeds, biologists must build special water catchments to bring in the precious moisture to give the seeds a chance. And finally everything must be covered with mulch, to prevent evaporation. In the Sonoran Desert, a pool of water vanishes in minutes.

High Cost for Seeds

All this hand labor may make restoration impossibly expensive. "The cost of the seeds alone is over \$200," said Dr. Jackson. With

per acre, millions of acres needing restoration, "people are either going to have to get used to paying a lot, that the diversity is worth it, or it just won't happen." So far the researchers at the Desert Botanical Garden have focused their experimental efforts on a few plots near Eloy totaling less than 20 acres.

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The New York Times

Desert restoration study sites are near Eloy, Ariz.

Even for the less environmentally minded, the churning dust bowls that exist in the absence of restoration can present problems. "The dust storms off these lands have killed people on the highways," said Dr. Jackson.

The humble saltbush scrub is often overshadowed, even in the eyes of biologists, by the flashier Saguaro cactus desert in the nearby highlands. The Sonoran Desert Museum in Tucson fails even to list the saltbush desert scrubland as one of the Sonoran desert habitats despite its vast former range, Dr. Jackson said.

As a result little is known about the biology of this habitat. "This area is so poorly described," said Dr. Jackson. "It's ignored. Biologists go to the sexy riparian areas, the mountains, the saguaro. It's pretty damned hot down here, too." Researchers at the botanic garden have found wildflowers that experts could not identify and that could prove to be a new species. "That tells you that something is going on," Dr. Jackson said. "There are probably new species out there."

Justifying the restoration of saltbush desert scrub can be difficult, since the deserts can look plain or even ugly, and offer no benefit to society as wetlands do with their water-filtering activity. For Dr. Jackson, the justification is simply the fact that the destruction remains unrepaired. "We came in here, we plowed this for a few years, and we made a mess so big that you can see it from space," Dr. Jackson said.

Dr. Jordan explains restoration as a way of building a link between

modern human communities alienated from nature and the land on which people live. "It's a new way of becoming attached to nature," he said. "Observing is one way to have a relationship with a thing but it's not a very intimate one. But humans can do much more than just observe. They can establish a relationship with its ecology, participate in its ecology"